

Alcott, *Little Women*, and the Popular Sublime

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Abstract: *In my reading of Alcott's Little Women tetralogy (1868-1886) I argue that the aesthetics it proclaims—mainly in the representation of the development of Jo's literary endeavours—can be conceived in terms of what I here define as a "popular sublime." In short, it consists of a depiction of everyday existence that transcends into political dimensions and in the case of Jo runs from a sharply cut and exaggerated melodramatic style over sensationalist thrills before it finally lands in sentimentalism with a political aim. I thus claim the popular sublime to be a conceptual move away from the eighteenth-century elitism in which the sublime experience caused magnificent existential angst in male solitude instead of the empathic tears and communal smiles as effected in for instance Alcott's and Beecher Stowe's sentimental realism of the nineteenth century. In the end, the popular sublime is all about recognizing the nobleness of others and the sublimity in all mankind which is the democratic message it can be said to convey.*

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It is a special gift, this power to bring tears and smiles, and a sweeter task to touch the heart than to freeze the blood or fire the imagination.

—*Louisa May Alcott*

Many of the characters in the novels and short stories by Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) are young female artists. Perhaps Jo, the writer depicted in the *Little Women* tetralogy (1868–1886), is the most famous example. Painters and sculptors such as Jo's sister Amy and her daughter Bess, as well as the characters in the unfinished novel *Diana and Persis* (written in 1878; published in 1978) are other instances. There are also many actresses in Alcott's *oeuvre*—for instance Jo's sister Meg and Meg's daughter Josie, as well as the protagonists in “Behind a Mask” (1866) and *Work* (1873).

Alcott not only represents female artists, however, but also their actual artistry and their conception of art. In a reading of the *Little Women* tetralogy I will here argue that the aesthetics it proclaims can be conceived in terms of what I define as a “popular sublime”—a depiction of everyday existence that transcends the mundane, reaching political dimensions. Therefore I will begin this essay with a presentation of the concept of the popular sublime and, in relation to this, discuss the emancipatory aspects of sentimentalism. Then, in my analysis of the tetralogy, I will concentrate on Jo's literary development, which goes from melodrama over sensationalism before it finds its final form in a political kind of sentimentalism.

The Popular Sublime

The sublime became an essential category in the aesthetic debate during the eighteenth century, signifying affects of fearful awe and magnificence. The sublime experience involves a transcendence of the mundane world of bodily experience and facilitates encounters with the spiritual—it is a matter both of a kind of liminal condition, *sub limis*, and of a feeling of elevation, *sublimis*. Such an experience is often considered a sign of the good and the noble in man, a more shallow experience lessens the ethical impact of the sublime.

Only the male gender has the full potential to experience the ennobling sublimity, at least according to eighteenth-century philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (cf. Fjelkestam 2014). Nevertheless, the popularization of the sublime in the following century made it possible for other groups in society, such as women and the working class, to consciously experience it. I would like to claim that the sublime consequently became an issue of democratization rather than of elitism, causing empathic tears and communal smiles, instead of magnificent existential angst in solitude (further developed in Fjelkestam 2010).

Scholars have maintained that popularization domesticates and weakens the sublime expression, an opinion I disagree with (cf. Barker). Instead, it is to me more constructive to analyze the popular sublime in the manner of scholars such as Anne K. Mellor, who suggests that “domesticating the sublime” involves transposing the annihilation of the Other to the differentiation of the Other, as do Ann Radcliffe’s gothic heroines, or lady Morgan’s representation of the sublime experience as something shared rather than something that is autonomous and solitary (Mellor). Furthermore, when Rita Felski analyzes the popular fiction by the best-selling author Marie Corelli, she points out that Corelli’s idealist and emotionally charged texts should be regarded as depicting sublimity’s spiritual dimensions in a different and even emancipatory manner (Felski). Thus the sublime has not lost its edge when it is popularized. It has rather been sharpened.

Emancipatory Potential in Sentimentalism

The emancipatory potential of the sublime is found in the ambition to make a foundation of transcendental values for the aesthetic experience—feeling, virtue and doctrine instead of material art objects. If eighteenth-century aesthetics initially asked the question “What sublime qualities does the object possess?”, this question was soon reformulated into “What effects do so-called sublime objects have on the mind and the emotions of the subject?” (Monk 9). The latter question was established and incorporated into nineteenth-century culture, and the sublime gradually hived off into the feelings of affect provoked by, for instance, popular sensation novels and by dramatic experiences of nature in tourist destinations such as Niagara Falls (Cvetkovich; Nye). But it is first and foremost the sentimental style that turns into popular sublimity, I claim, and in the work of Alcott, sentimentalism also accommodates an emancipatory potential.

The sentimental novel had its initial heyday in the works of eighteenth-century authors such as Richardson and Rousseau, but it was gradually conceived as frumpish with its expression of grandiose feelings and embellished writing, especially as it was later most often written by and for women: “From the 1780s onwards, sentimental literature and the principles behind it were bombarded with criticism and ridicule” (Todd). Sentimentalism is in this pejorative sense conceived as a kind of idealism, opposite of realism, which is usually considered as the finest invention of the nineteenth century. This division is, however, no longer valid, since schol-

ars have demonstrated that idealism can be more politically effective than realism (cf. Schor). Realism, in its turn, is not, of course, a homogenous concept. Roman Jakobson discussed this as early as in 1921 in his article "Realism in Art", in which he pointed out that representations of "reality" always depend on current literary conventions (Jakobson). Since these conventions change over time, sensationalist literature can, on the one hand, be considered realist in comparison to romanticism, because it does not shy away from the unsightly aspects of life, but, on the other hand, it can seem exaggerated and stereotypical in comparison to the literary conventions of naturalism.

In previous research, sentimentality used to signify inferior art and mass culture with feminine overtones (cf. Douglas). Moreover, the sentimental novel was also conceived as a nagging moralization rather than a constructive politicization, but in the recent twenty years scholars have started to focus on the latter aspect. Two of the earliest attempts at understanding the genre in this manner are Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs* and Philip Fisher's *Hard Facts*, both from 1985. From studying, for instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), both Fisher and Tompkins claim that there are politically radical aspects in sentimental narratives. Important tools in the sentimental style of writing are rhetorical devices such as allegoric stylization and *tableaus* intensifying emotions, tools which evoke strong emotions in the reader. Emotional reactions such as grief, anger, joy and empathy aim to create an ethically based aspiration for truth, the good and beauty. In this sense the sentimental novel can be said to bridge the border between the public and the private (Hendler). By extension, it can in this way both represent and provoke a politically motivated wish to change society for the better, and Bruce Burgett stresses that the sentimental novel "relied upon readers' affective, passionate, and embodied responses to fictive characters and situations in order to produce political effects" (Burgett 3). I want to suggest that Alcott's staging of especially Jo's literary development recommends exactly such a politically allusive artistry.

The word sentimental comes from Latin *sentire in mente*, feeling in the mind. Sentiment does not necessarily provoke good deeds; one can content oneself with "feeling" sorry for the poor but still exploit them. However, the concept can also imply that a feeling is intellectually translatable into an ethic idea. Thus sentimentalism constitutes a meeting place for the private and the public also in the sense that the welfare of the nation can be described as built by the tears of its citizens, to paraphrase Claudia L. Johnson

(Johnson 2). As I see it, the sentimental comprises an enlightenment belief in man's innate benevolence, and therefore the sentimental becomes a political virtue parallel to the sublime during the nineteenth century.

The plot in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does not consist of the unsolvable conflict between two equal imperatives—we or I, duty or pleasure—as in the sentimental novel of the earlier decade. Instead the novel presents a solution, the duty to follow one's emotions. In a religious spirit it is more important to listen to your heart and your inner feelings than to obey external rules and regulations, and Harriet Beecher Stowe accordingly claims that the law and order of the material world clash with transcendental values when it comes to slavery. However, just as in the sentimental novel of the eighteenth-century, death can be one of the answers to the dilemma of the plot. In sacrificing one's life for others one can change the world, Beecher Stowe proposes, and in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* both Uncle Tom and little Evangeline St. Clare assume Christlike proportions through their sacrifice. Naturally, critics have pointed out the doubtful mission to elevate passivity into active ability, just like they have questioned the belief that emotions always lead you on the right path. Nevertheless, the use of rhetorical tools and the way in which Beecher Stowe tells her story are undeniably very effective. The narrator's direct address to the reader, the sharply stylized characters, and the emotionally charged *tableaux* make the message unmistakable: Slavery must cease to exist!

However, and this is my main point, the sentimental novel of the nineteenth century does not try to obtain the feeling of violent fear, as in the gothic novel from Lewis's *The Monk* to Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Instead it tries to effect affective benevolence in order to reach certain political goals. This is also a constant element in what I define as the popular sublime. This will be my argument in the subsequent reading of *Little Women*.

Melodramatic Excitement

The *Little Women* tetralogy is made up of *Little Women* (1868), *Good Wives* (1869), *Little Men* (1871), *Jo's Boys* (1886), and in these novels the popular sublime develops aesthetically and politically from exciting melodrama over thrilling sensationalism to the everyday realism of sentimentalism.

In *Little Women*, we first meet the sisters when they work on the annual Christmas play. For this year's performance Jo has written a melodramatic "Operatic Tragedy" with the suggestive title "The Witch's Curse," partly

inspired by the sublime tragedy *Macbeth*—which is evident from the opening of the first act where a terrifying witch prepares her brew in a gloomy forest. An impressed sister likens Jo to “a regular Shakespeare!” (Alcott 1876/1868, 18), master of the sublime, and the parable returns throughout the tetralogy (201; 1886, 43). Also as a director, Jo seems to aim at affect rather than perfection, and the lines are supposed to be delivered with “a melodramatic scream that was truly thrilling” (18). The play is consequently no longer about the noble elevation of the frightful sublime, but instead a popularized variant of excitement.

The drama is constructed as a series of *tableaux*, typical of both the melodrama and the sentimental novel, as are the sharply chiselled characters. In addition, the plot is written with much verve and spirit, which becomes obvious in the summary of the last act:

Act fifth opened with a stormy scene between Zara and Don Pedro. He wishes her to go into a convent, but she won't hear of it; and, after a touching appeal, is about to faint, when Roderigo dashes in and demands her hand. Don Pedro refuses, because he is not rich. They shout and gesticulate tremendously, but cannot agree, and Roderigo is about to bear away the exhausted Zara, when the timid servant enters with a letter and a bag from [the witch], who has mysteriously disappeared. The latter informs the party that she bequeathes untold wealth to the young pair, and an awful doom to Don Pedro if he doesn't make them happy. The bag is opened, and several quarts of tin money shower down upon the stage, till it is quite glorified with the glitter. This entirely softens the “stern sire;” he consents without a murmur, all join in a joyful chorus, and the curtain falls upon the lovers kneeling to receive Don Pedro's blessing, in attitudes of the most romantic grace. (35f)

The typical *tableaux* here consist of Zara's “touching appeal”, the money rain, and the kneeling lovers at the very end, receiving their well-earned blessing. Furthermore, Don Pedro's request that Zarah enters a convent refers to the well-known scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. At the same time, however, the breathless punctuation of the re-telling is an ironical rendering of the play's incessant piling up of fateful episodes, and the melodramatic motions are depicted as rather absurd: “They shout and gesticulate tremendously.”

The melodramatic exaggeration contributes to the play's popular appeal. When the castle tower collapses over the loving couple, a “universal shriek arose” from the audience, and, at the same time, “russet boots waved wildly from the wreck” in a supposedly unintentional comical effect. When the seats in the auditorium also fall apart, the audience lose their power of speech—because of laughter rather than of fear. Laughter notwithstand-

ing, it is possible to reach artistic heights in individual performances. In the first act, for instance, Jo's Hugo is met with frantic applause and later Meg's witch sings "more wonderful than all the rest of the performance put together" (34f).

The first short story that Jo publishes later is called "The Rival Painters" (just like Alcott's own first publication, as Madeleine Stern points out (Alcott 1975, xiii). When this story has been printed in a magazine Alcott reads it aloud to her sisters, without telling them the author's name. The melodramatic story is described as romantic and sad because most of the characters die in the end, and the sisters are delighted. Jo is encouraged by the family's appreciation, and to everybody's joy she reveals that she is the author of it. She then continues to write stories in order to help support the poor household.

Sensationalist Thrills

In the second part of the *Little Women* tetralogy, *Good Wives*, Jo's literary endeavours are described mainly in the fourth chapter. When she falls into her creative "vortex," she works intently for days, even weeks, on end:

Every few weeks she would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and "fall into a vortex," as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace. [...] her family, who, during these periods, kept their distance, merely popping in their heads semi-occasionally, to ask, with interest, "Does genius burn, Jo?" (Alcott 1876/1869, 43f)

The question whether her genius burns is perhaps asked with good intention, but the question still appears ironic. Apparently it is crucial for Alcott to persist in emphasizing that Jo, and the other sisters for that matter, are *not* artistically sublime geniuses. Amy also desires to become an artist, but in spite of all her efforts she finds that talent and genius are not the same—a recurring motto in *Good Wives*. Still, she patiently continues to struggle with different genres in painting and sculpture, "firmly believing that in time she should do something worthy to be called 'high art'" (32). Amy even goes to Rome in order to improve her art, but again fails according to the motto "talent isn't genius" and instead marries Laurie, the boy next door. By then, Meg is also married and has put her acting career on the shelf, while Beth the musician has died. Only Jo's artistic dreams remain.

Jo continues to work on her novel with heart and soul, but suddenly she

gets a glimpse of a magazine, *The Weekly Volcano*. Its cover is gaudy, and the illustration consists of a seductive combination of

an Indian in full war costume, tumbling over a precipice with a wolf at his throat, while two infuriated young gentlemen, with unnaturally small feet and big eyes, were stabbing each other close by, and a dishevelled female was flying away in the background, with her mouth wide open. (45)

Consequently it is an excitingly exotic picture that fires the imagination. The authors in the magazine receive good pay for their sensationalist stories, and they are inspired by the gothic genre, much appreciated in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The stories are much more thrilling than the mildly romantic ones printed in *The Spread Eagle*, and worse written (Alcott here paraphrases E. D. E. N. Southworth, the famous ensationalist writer). Jo thinks she can do a better job and immediately writes a story, inspired by her earlier experience of melodramatic writing. The hair-raising ending consists of the Lisbon earthquake, “a striking and appropriate *dénouement*” (47). This violent outcome reaches sublime heights in its allusion to Lisbon’s natural disaster in 1755, which became famous in literature with Voltaire’s “Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne” in 1756.

With her thrilling story Jo participates in a contest and wins a substantial sum of money. For the first time she feels properly acknowledged for her toil, but her father implies that she should aim higher in her artistic endeavours. Jo’s income is a necessary contribution to the family’s economy, however. The sensationalist tale “The Duke’s Daughter” pays the butcher’s bill, “A Phantom Hand” buys a new carpet, and “Curse of the Coventrys” covers running expenses.

During a visit to New York she contacts *The Weekly Volcano*. She begins freelancing for them, an assignment she takes very seriously: “Like most young scribblers, she went abroad for her characters and scenery; and banditti, counts, gypsies, nuns, and duchesses appeared upon her stage, and played their parts with as much accuracy and spirit as could be expected” (150). The editor demands “thrilling tales” from her, and Jo understands that “thrills could not be produced except by harrowing up the souls of the readers” (151). The sublime is here put into public service.

Jo realizes that her limited life experience is not enough to bring about these thrilling tales. She tries to expand her knowledge by studying history, science, art, police records and mental hospitals. She happily throws herself into collecting material and looking out for accidents and crimes in

the newspapers, finding books about poison in the library, going back to the fact and fiction of antiquity, observing people's appearances and behaviours in the streets, "and introduced herself to folly, sin, and misery, as well as her limited opportunities allowed," but eventually her work leads Jo to "desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character [...]" and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us" (151f). A woman cannot expose herself to the darker sides of society without losing her femininity, the narrator proposes. A similar kind of criticism was in reality directed against the budding female reporters of the time, whose tasks were similar to the ones Jo set herself in her preparatory work.

Politicizing the Sentimental

Jo decides to leave *The Weekly Volcano* and try her luck in other genres, such as didactic stories and children's books, but she does not succeed in getting them published. Eventually she finds the sentimental realistic style, which is considered to be right for her—more appropriate for her femininity, one might assume.

When she is struck by grief after Beth's death, she returns writing out of her own feelings and experiences. The result goes "straight to the hearts of those who read it." Her father forwards it to a popular magazine in which it becomes a complete success. Jo herself cannot understand why this simple story is so highly praised, so her father explains:

There is truth in it, Jo - that's the secret; humour and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last. You wrote with no thought of fame or money, and put your heart into it, my daughter; you have had the bitter, now comes the sweet; do your best, and grow as happy as we are in your success. (262)

According to his argument, which I call the aesthetics of the popular sublime, artistic authenticity is attained by empathy in the sentimental form of both mild humour and sincere pathos. But art demands its tribute. To reach it, Jo has been forced to humble herself before Professor Bhaer's moralizing lectures and her father's request to never strive after fame and riches. Not until then, when she is also crushed by her sister's decease, does she deserve encouragement and success, "taught by love and sorrow" (262). And not until then, when she has almost given up, can she in all humility write

her heart's "truth" in order to eventually, in *Jo's Boys*, manage to convey Alcott's emancipatory vision to a wider audience.

In the explicitly feminist *Jo's Boys*, the last part of the *Little Women* series, Meg's daughter Josie is introduced. Early on, she conveys her opinion on the issue of female emancipation when she claims that "a woman can act as well, if not better, than a man. It *has* been done, and will be again; and I'll never own that *my* brain isn't as good as his, though it may be smaller" (40f; Alcott's italics).

For Josie, there is nothing she wants more than to become an actress. Jo finds her to be naturally gifted, "a born actress" (Alcott 1886, 26). Cousin Bess for her part, daughter to Amy, wants to be the painter and sculptor her mother dreamt about becoming, but Bess's and Josie's mothers oppose them. Jo has to take on the role of mediator, and she supports both Bess and Josie in their choice of occupation. In the very last section of *Jo's Boys*, which also finishes the tetralogy, the reader finds out that "Bess and Josie won honors in their artistic careers, and in the course of time found worthy mates" (335). Thus both of the girls grow up to become successful artists, something that does not prevent them from also becoming happily married. They no longer have to choose only one of the options, like their mothers had to do.

Josie manages to get the opportunity to audition before the famous actress Miss Cameron, in order to find out if she has talent or not. Miss Cameron is exactly the kind of actress Josie herself wants to become, something which the narrator agrees on is the best kind: "the stage needs just such women to purify and elevate the profession which should teach as well as amuse" (142). Miss Cameron remains rather cool when she is brought face to face with Josie's talent since she considers her still too young to decide on her future, but then Josie bursts out in an animated speech on the calling of the stage, which she cannot resist:

I only want to find out if I have talent enough to go on, and after years of study be able to act well in any of the good plays people never tire of seeing. I don't expect to be a Mrs. Siddons or a Miss Cameron, much as I long to be; but it *does* seem as if I had something in me which can't come out in any way but this. When I act I'm perfectly happy. I seem to live, to be in my own world, and each new part is a new friend. I love Shakespeare, and am never tired of his splendid people. Of course I don't understand it all; but it's like being alone at night with the mountains and the stars, solemn and grand, and I try to imagine how it will look when the sun comes up, and all is glorious and clear to me. I can't see, but I feel the beauty, and long to express it. (152)

In trying to conceptualize her strong feelings, Josie comes out with a parallel that expresses sublimity. She compares the experience of Shakespeare's play to the one that "solemn and grand" presents itself when the wonders of the world—such as mountain peaks and the heavenly sky—are contemplated in solitude. Just like the experience of the wonders of nature, the experience of art results in a striking and existential understanding of enhanced feeling. The charged moment in which Josie expresses her thoughts and emotions then leaves her nobly pallid but with intensely glittering eyes—an image of sublimity.

As Miss Cameron yields to this convincing speech on the necessity of acting, she still preaches patience. Proper art demands hard work. Miss Cameron asks herself how come the audience can be satisfied with contemporary dramatic art such as "opera-bouffe, or the trash called society plays, when a world of truth and beauty, poetry and pathos, lies waiting to be interpreted and enjoyed?" Josie then reveals that nowadays Jo writes plays that actually deal with the true and the beautiful in the shape of "simple domestic scenes that touch people's hearts, and make them laugh and cry and feel better," that is, the popular sublime. However, Josie prefers to act in pompous tragedies, even though her uncle has told her that she appears more to her advantage in the kind of plays that he and Jo prefer. Miss Cameron agrees with them and emphasizes that to touch people's hearts with tears and smiles instead of fear is what can be considered "high art" (154f). After having seen Josie's acting in a sentimental play of everyday realism, that is, a play that warms the heart rather than freezes it, she is convinced that Josie has a future on the stage.

The play in which she sees Josie is written by Jo, and it becomes such a success that Jo bursts out to her sister Meg: "Oh, why aren't you a real actress, and I a real playwright?" (223). The staging of the plays also connects to the aesthetics maintained by Miss Cameron, in which an actor is supposed to *be* instead of *act*. Empathic insight based on experience is considered the road to high dramatic art also, for instance, in Geraldine Jewsbury's artist novel *The Half Sisters* (1848), and this is an aesthetic tradition that goes back to the eighteenth-century critique of classicism's rigid declamations.

At first, Jo had planned to write a play filled with "noble speeches and thrilling situations" in a more conventionally sublime style, but in the end she contents herself with sentimental everyday realism. It is supposed to make up for a pronounced repudiation of the artificiality of contemporary French melodrama, which, according to Jo, consists of "curious mixtures

of fine toilettes, false sentiment, and feeble wit, with no touch of nature to redeem them" (217). Instead, the protagonist of Jo's play is a grey-haired mother with grown children. One of the daughters dies and leaves her an infant, the other daughter is brought home from the temptations of city life, and the only son returns to his mother as a disabled soldier, but the last scene shows the family gathered at the Christmas table, and an existential homage to the mother finishes the play.

The pathetics of the play is successful, and Jo finds that this can be the starting signal for the distribution of sentimental realism all over the continent: "Now we can venture to begin our great American drama" (228). In this new drama genre, art and nature would be connected in an elevated style of high art consisting of awe-inspiring representations: "nature and art go hand in hand, with little help from fine writing or imposing scenery" (232). This "imposing scenery" consists also of sublime moments of the everyday, such as the homage to a toiling mother. Invoking tears and smiles then rouses an inclination towards generosity amongst the spectators, and thus a better world might see the light of day.

The sentimental novel came of age parallel to the development of the bourgeoisie, and Suzanne Clark has early on rightly stressed that "[t]he sentimental as form, a set of tropes, and a rhetorical stance is profoundly intertwined with the historical conflicts of middle-class culture" (Clark 2). These conflicts were, amongst other things, evolving around women's emancipatory struggles, something which is also the theme in other parts of Alcott's *oeuvre*. There is not enough space to develop a discussion of them here, however, but I will end my reading of the *Little Women* tetralogy by referring to one other example, the novel *Work*. Its protagonist Christie tries several different careers, especially the one of the melodramatic actress. In the last chapter she eventually finds her true calling, which combines her acting skills with her political drive. As an agitator for the women's rights movement she puts her ability to represent strong feelings and to mediate an enhanced sensual perception into the service of society, and in naming her task "great and noble" (Alcott 1892/1873, 430) Christie's speeches truly stage the popular sublime in the sense that I have here put forward.

Conclusion

As I define the popular sublime, which instead of fear and existential angst executes empathic tears and smiles of recognition in order to achieve politi-

cal goals, I here argue that it becomes central in the aesthetics of the *Little Women* tetralogy and also in some other parts of Alcott's *oeuvre*. In the tetralogy it runs from a sharply cut and exaggerated melodramatic style in "The Witch's Curse" and "The Rival Painters", over sensationalist thrills in *The Weekly Volcano* magazine, to finally land in political sentimentality. In *Good Wives*, Jo first finds her inner voice, "her heart's truth", but Alcott's politics of the popular sublime does not become completely clear until the last part of the tetralogy, where it is tied to the form of Jo's sentimental drama. In depicting everyday life in an elevated and uplifting style, the sublime here transforms into a mode of experiencing grandness in the smaller details of human life instead of a more abstractly existential and individual dimension, which makes people care about each other's strives and trifles. They might then also start to think about a better future, something which at the time could lead to challenging the situation of slaves as in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or the conditions for women as in *Little Women*.

In the end it is all about recognizing the nobleness of others, the sublimity in all mankind, and this is the democratic message conveyed by the popular sublime. As Alcott writes in *Jo's Boys*, quoted in the very beginning of the essay: "It is a special gift, this power to bring tears and smiles, and a sweeter task to touch the heart than to freeze the blood or fire the imagination" (154f). As such, this special gift might well be put into political practice.

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